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Brenda Major elected to National Academy of Sciences

For her pioneering and decades-long body of work on the psychological impacts of prejudice and discrimination, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) has elected Brenda Major, a distinguished professor emerita in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences. For a scientist, NAS membership is among the highest honors worldwide.

"I was blown away, overjoyed, shocked and thrilled," Major said about receiving the news on a morning call from the academy. "It's a highlight of my professional life."

Major is one of the world's experts on the psychology of stigma. Her distinguished achievements in the field include research, writing and teaching about the psychological and physical impact of being a target of prejudice and discrimination. Traditionally, psychological research on prejudice focused on understanding its causes; why, for example, some people are disliked and discriminated against because of their race, gender or religion. Major took a different and initially unconventional approach, studying people on the receiving end of prejudice — how they perceive and cope with being a target of social stigma and discrimination and the impacts on their psychological well-being and physical health.

"That has been the focus of my work throughout my entire career," she said, adding that she has also written extensively about factors that shape perceptions of fairness more generally, as well as the psychological effects of practices to reduce

discrimination, such as diversity initiatives and, more recently, anti-bias policies.

“All of us at UC Santa Barbara join in congratulating professor Major on this well-deserved honor and milestone achievement,” said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. “Election to the National Academy of Sciences is a testament to Brenda's renown among her colleagues, and affirmation of her pioneering research contributions. We could not be more proud of her accomplishments and career commitment to advancing scientific knowledge, notably in the areas of the psychology of stigma and psychological resilience."

Many of Major’s theoretical and empirical contributions have become seminal works in the field, noted Shelly Gable, department chair and professor. “Her work is noted equally for its intellectual rigor and societal importance. We are thrilled to have her as a colleague, and the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences is incredibly proud to congratulate her. This prestigious honor recognizes her scientific contributions and commitment to making our society a better place.”

Established as an Act of Congress signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, the NAS is a private nonprofit institution. Its members serve as pro bono advisors, "providing independent objective advice to the nation on matters related to science and technology [and] scientific advice whenever called upon by any government department.”

Major was among the 120 new domestic members added this year after a formal process of nomination, vetting and election by existing members. Overall, the academy consists of more than 2,600 U.S. citizens and more than 500 nonvoting international scientists. Counting living and deceased, Major is the 50th member of NAS affiliated with UCSB as their primary institution.

Major joined UCSB in 1995 and retired from teaching in 2023. She continues to write and is currently working on a paper about how anti-bias norms affect perceptions of the authenticity of praise to members of marginalized groups.

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